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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today urged U.S. Under Secretary Maria Otero to make religious freedom a priority in her discussions with government officials and civil society in Indonesia this week.

“Extremist groups, intolerance and impunity are threatening Indonesian democracy and religious freedom,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “How Indonesia responds to these threats will determine its future stability. We urge Under Secretary Otero to make the protection of religious freedom and pluralism a critical focus of her discussions, as it is vital to U.S. security, economic, and political interests in Indonesia.”

Ms. Otero is scheduled to meet with Indonesian government officials and civil society leaders on issues of elections, civilian security, water, human rights and youth empowerment.

Ms. Otero will join later with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Bali from July 22 to July 24, where they will participate in meetings with Indonesian government officials at the margins of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

“Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is finally saying the right things about societal violence and extremist groups and the need to prosecute those who undertake or incite violence, but there remains a gap between rhetoric and practice,” said Leo. “Does the Indonesian government have the political will or capacity to make necessary reforms? The United States should work with Indonesians committed to religious freedom, assisting government agencies and civil society groups to counter extremism, mediate sectarian conflict,

protect religious minorities and women, reform the police and military, and build interfaith efforts at legal reform and public advocacy. These priorities are in the long-term interests of both our countries.”

A USCIRF delegation traveled to Indonesia in May 2010 and witnessed firsthand the vitality of Indonesia’s democracy, the strength of civil society, and the depth of religious devotion. However, religious leaders and civil society representatives expressed a lack of confidence in the Indonesian government’s ability to reform national laws that discriminate or encourage violence against religious minorities and women, to restrain religiously-motivated extremist groups whose influence far exceeds their size or electoral appeal, and to train police, military, and government officials to protect religious and ethnic minorities.

In its 2011 Annual Report USCIRF concluded that Indonesia’s traditions of religious tolerance and pluralism are increasingly threatened. Religious minorities experience patterns of intimidation, discrimination, and societal violence often perpetuated by groups espousing intolerance and extremism under the banner of Islamic orthodoxy and that are too often tolerated by segments of the Indonesian government and police. Problematic national and provincial laws, such as a national blasphemy law and anti-Ahmadiyah decrees, compound these concerns. In addition, provincial laws restrict the rights of women and some non-Muslims and vague decrees governing the building of religious venues have lead to forced closures and destruction of property.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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